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Editorial: On Genuine Dialogue

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On Genuine Dialogue

John Updike's story "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and So Forth" memorably presents a portrait of a high school English teacher. I read the story long ago, but it has stayed in my mind, in particular thanks to one line in the tale, a moment when the teacher decides "[h]e could safely assume his human-among-humans attitude again." The description reverberates for me because it demonstrates the falsity of the teacher's approach to interacting with his students: he's just posing.

I think of Updike's English teacher as I read two essays in our current issue that emphasize a dropping of poses in favor of genuine dialogue: Mel Cohen's "Let's Talk: Enhancing Teaching and Learning through Student-Faculty Dialogues" and Patricia J. Schulster's "Forums: Bridging the Gap between High School and College Writing." Cohen and Schulster describe two programs with similar objectives: building communicative bridges between groups of people engaged in the process of higher education.

Cohen describes how he and a number of teaching colleagues created a program that brought faculty and students together regularly to discuss their lives as teachers and students on a two-year college campus. Schulster presents an engaging discussion of a program on her two-year campus that enabled a series of forums between local high school English teachers and college faculty.

In the first case, Mel Cohen asks logical questions, "Why should we take the time outside of class to discuss teaching and learning with students? Didn't we see students in class, meet with them in our offices, pass them in the halls, and advise student groups? Why more contact?" Similar questions could be raised about Schulster's Writing Forums program: Why all this effort? What's the value?

Both writers, I think, reach similar conclusions: only when interested parties can drop the poses that, to some degree, are imposed upon them by their institutional roles can genuine communication take place. Ultimately, these dialogues and forums have the same purpose: improved outcomes for students. Schulster writes that opening a dialogue among teachers "matters not just for us, the teachers of writing, but also for our students, who must somehow successfully bridge the gap between high school-level and college-level writing. We need to create our own bridge to each other before we can offer one to students." And Cohen concludes that "not only are student perceptions interesting, but they also are integral to teaching and learning and therefore critical to educational outcomes."

Updike's English teacher is a *poseur*, one whose self-consciousness prevents him from actually communicating with his students. I'm quite pleased that we can offer two articles in this issue that argue persuasively for the value of dropping all poses and entering into genuine dialogue. I hope some variation of both Cohen's student-faculty dialogues and Schulster's forums can find their way onto many of your campuses.

—J.S.